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ON PAGE C19

THE WASHINGTON POST
29 September 1981

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Another Chapter In Weird Saga of Ex-CIA Agents

At the lowest point in U.S. relations with Idi Amin, a Ugandan airliner made an unauthorized landing at a California airport and was permitted to leave with what was apparently an illegal shipment of high explosives. Amin is the homicidal maniac who ruled Uganda until his overthrow two years ago.

The incident was yet another chapter in the weird saga of Frank Terpil and Ed Wilson, the fugitive ex-CIA agents whose sordid exploits I have been reporting for the past year. The two renegades had made a lucrative career supplying explosives and terrorist training to Amin and his Libyan buddy, Muammar Qaddafi.

The airport incident occurred on Sept. 20, 1977, according to secret Justice Department reports examined by my associate Dale Van Atta. The United States had not had an embassy in Kampala since 1973; just seven months before the mysterious cargo pickup, President Carter had denounced Idi Amin as a ruler whose actions "have disgusted the entire civilized world."

The assistant manager of the Ontario (Calif.) International Airport told federal investigators he had initially directed the Ugandan airliner to Los Angeles. But the pilot refused, "stating there was cargo at Ontario to be picked up."

On landing, the plane was directed to a remote area of the field and sealed off. Several hours later, U.S. Customs agents boarded it and found an Egyptian captain, a Ugandan co-pilot, a Lebanese flight engineer and several Ugandan flight attendants.

An attorney for Jerome S. Brower, a well-known explosives dealer, arrived and said the cargo was waiting at the Aerojet Inc. hangar. Next came Terpil, who said he was "a representative of Ugandan Airlines" and would handle everything.

One of the Customs agents, having determined that the cargo was electronic equipment, OK'd it for shipment.

But the Customs agent returned the next day, Sept. 21, because "the situation at the airport bothered him," according to one of the secret reports. This time he found a shipment of explosives waiting to be loaded.

"The liquid explosive, with a flash point of 110 degrees or 120 degrees, was sitting on the runway in cans," he told investigators. "As the day got hotter, the cans began to burst and the liquid was seeping out onto the runway and later onto the floor of the aircraft."

The explosives had come from Brower's company. The Customs agent also spotted some 55-gallon drums of an unknown substance nearby, but was told they weren't part of the shipment. He told investigators he didn't know if any of the drums had been loaded earlier, but another Customs agent said he had seen some in the cargo hold.

But when the agents checked with the State Department in Washington, they were told there was no reason to prevent the export of the explosives. The plane was approved for departure, and flew out that day after filing a flight plan to Canada.

"All bills for food, fuel and airport services were paid in U.S. currency out of a suitcase held by the pilot," the reports said.

Brower pleaded guilty earlier this year to one count of illegally shipping explosives to Libya in 1976 through Terpil. The Aerojet Inc. facility chief at Ontario, Frank Dolinski, told investigators he had let Brower, who once worked for the company, use the hangar, and was shocked when he learned it had been used to load a Ugandan aircraft. Dolinski was reprimanded by Aerojet officials.

One thing is not clear: high explosives had been embargoed for shipment to Uganda. So why was a Ugandan airplane allowed to pick up explosives? One Customs agent at the airport said the load was not inspected because he "wouldn't know one explosive from another anyway."